

RPG Reload File 045 – ‘Sorcery!’

[July 2, 2015](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)



Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where we never seem to have enough rations to get by. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how well it's holding up in the present day. It's a bit of revisiting, a bit of reflecting, and a chance to take a deeper dive than our usual reviews allow for. I'll try to present a balanced plate of RPGs from week to week, hopefully representing what is an incredibly wide genre, but I'm always open to suggestions. If you know a game that you'd like to see featured, simply leave a comment below, post in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or tweet me at [@RPGReload](#). There's just one more regular reader's choice article after this one, with September bringing a few changes to the schedule. If there's something you really want to see me play and write about soon, it's time to get those recommendations in!

It's been a while since we've covered a gamebook in the **RPG Reload**, but you can expect to see them appear from time to time. After all, they *are* the original handheld RPGs. They're also a match made in heaven with mobile devices. Previous attempts to make video games from gamebooks either suffered from technological limitations, like the early Spectrum ports of the *Lone Wolf* books, or were essentially completely different products using the same name, such as *Deathtrap Dungeon* on PC/PlayStation or *Warlock Of Firetop Mountain* on Nintendo DS. A lot of the problems came from the rigid pricing structures in pre-digital delivery eras. Games were sold for \$40-60, but nobody would pay that for a straight port of a gamebook when they could pick up the real thing for a fraction of the price. Mobile changed all of

that, providing a good format, pricing structure, and market for gamebooks. Big Blue Bubble took advantage of it early with some conversions of popular *Fighting Fantasy* books, while Tin Man Games made the scene pretty quickly with their own original, yet fairly orthodox titles.

It would be a couple of years before another serious contender threw their hat in that particular ring. While they would soon shake up the mobile gamebook scene in a major way, inkle got their start mostly coloring inside the lines. The company was founded in November 2011 by Joseph Humfrey and Jon Ingold, a couple of ex-Sony developers who were no strangers to interactive fiction and gaming. Their first project was a gamebook take on Mary Shelley's horror classic *Frankenstein*. To bring the book to life, they created *inklewriter*, a custom tool designed for creating interactive fiction. While you've mostly seen *inklewriter* in inkle's own releases, strategy game fans will likely also have encountered it in Stoic Studios' wonderful title *The Banner Saga* ([\\$9.99](#)). Dave Morris, for my money one of the better gamebook writers out there, handled the writing and adaptation of Shelley's story for the project, and the finished product was published through Profile Books in April of 2012.

While it was conceptually pretty interesting to turn an existing novel into a gamebook, the reactions to *Frankenstein* ([\\$3.99](#)) were somewhat mixed. inkle would eventually hit this idea square on the head with their later title *80 Days* ([\\$4.99](#)), but for the time being, they moved on to their next project. By this time, a major shake-up had occurred with the *Fighting Fantasy* license. Big Blue Bubble saw their rights to the popular gamebook series expire and Tin Man Games had wasted no time in picking those rights up. Somehow in all of that, a particular subset of the series had ended up in someone else's hands. But then again, the *Steve Jackson's Sorcery!* series of gamebooks were always a bit odd in the greater scheme of *Fighting Fantasy*. Originally published from 1983 to 1985 outside of the numbering of the regular series, this four-book set had its own special rules that separated it from the rest. It even came with its own spellbook, a necessary piece of support for *Sorcery!*

's expanded magic rules. You were meant to carry your character over from book to book, which was also unusual for *Fighting Fantasy*. This distinction from the main series could explain why the license for these particular gamebooks ended up in the hands of inkle as opposed to Tin Man.

By the time inkle's version of the first *Sorcery!* ([\\$4.99](#)) hit the market, Tin Man Games had become the major face of the mobile gamebook scene. They're mostly famous for their pristine, faithful conversions of existing physical books, along with high-quality original works that could be physical books rather easily. inkle would take a different route with their conversion of *Sorcery! 1 – The Shamutani Hills*. They could have turned in a replica of the book with some of the niceties that come with digital versions, such as not needing dice, paper, and a pencil. Fans would surely have praised them just for including the spellbook for handy reference. Instead, inkle opted to use the original book as a source for something that couldn't easily be done with an actual paper book, while at the same time remaining loyal to the spirit of the work. They would carry this farther and farther with each successive release, but for now, we're only looking at the first *Sorcery!* app.

If you're a regular reader of the site, I don't need to convince you about my love for gamebooks. At the same time, I can see why they're a niche thing. By design, they can usually only be so complex without putting undue hardship on the reader for accounting. The solutions often feel random, as though you would need to discover them by trial and error rather than any strategy on your part. Combat traditionally was handled with dice rolls, putting your fate at the whims of a little cube that seemed more likely to betray you with each toss. Of course, we also need to mention the elephant in the corner. They involve a lot of reading with little in the way of visual stimulation, and that's something that people seem to be less on-board with as time goes on. I have to wonder if perhaps inkle saw the same things I do, because *Sorcery!* seems designed to address most of those criticisms.

There's still quite a bit of reading, of course. You won't escape that easily.

Then again, if you're reading this paragraph, I sense you have no qualms about that aspect. *Sorcery!* uses a little trick to sizzle up the presentation, though. Whenever a choice involves moving to another location, the text gives way to a map of the world, where you drag your piece along like you're playing a board game. It's a small thing that inkle would eventually greatly expand on in later games, but even here it serves the role of breaking up the text and giving the world a more cohesive feeling. The illustrations from the original book are here, too, adding a bit of visual punch to certain scenes. The battles present another means of giving your eyes a break by showing both your character and your opponent in various poses, but the changes here are more than just cosmetic.

Now, I don't mind rolling dice to determine my fate. I'm a lifelong RPG fan, I make my daily sacrifices to the RNG gods. But even I have to admit, it can be a bit soul-crushing when you finally work out the right path through a gamebook only to get crunched under the feet of a Livingstone-style monster gauntlet. It feels very contrary to the spirit of an adventure that otherwise relies on careful observation and problem-solving. For *Sorcery!*, inkle completely dispensed with the dice and took advantage of the fact that a digital version of the game could use rudimentary AI to provide challenge to the player in lieu of random rolls. In inkle's system, you're essentially playing advanced rock-paper-scissors with the enemy. You and the enemy each have a set amount of attack power to throw behind your attacks. You determine how much you want to use of it on each turn by sliding your character towards the enemy. Whoever commits the most power during that turn will deal damage to the other, with the exact amount dependent on how much power you use. You can also block, which recovers power and reduces the enemy's attack to one point of damage, regardless of how much power they put behind it. Ideally, you block when the enemy throws their full power out, toss out a weak attack if they're blocking, and use a strong attack when they use a weak one.

At first glance, this seems just as random as rolling a dice, and it would be if

it weren't for one other wrinkle the developers added in. As you fight, the combat is described in text at the top of the screen. That text, if you pay careful attention, will offer up clues as to the enemy's next move. Every enemy behaves a little differently, so you have to get to know them to really take advantage of this, but wouldn't you know it? At the conclusion of any battle, you can choose to try it again from the start. The enemy tells don't change, even if their exact actions from turn to turn do, so eventually, you can pull off a nearly-flawless victory if you're patient and observant. This costs the game a bit of its challenge, but in return, you have a system that feels fair and rewards careful reading. I also like how the power level you choose for your attack isn't just a number. Each range corresponds with a different attack, and your character will pose accordingly. Again, it's a little detail, but it goes a long way.

As for the adventure itself, well, the *Sorcery!* series was always a cut above the usual *Fighting Fantasy* fare. All of the memorable encounters from the book can be found here, just in a form that's easier to digest. You don't need to follow the One True Path, picking up everything that isn't nailed down along the way. You simply need to survive, and the game will mostly make sure that you'll be able to get through one way or another. Even the matter of survival is made easier by allowing you to rewind time on bad decisions. Let's be honest, most gamebook players afford themselves that luxury anyway. For a first chapter, *Shamutani Hills* has a reasonably climactic ending, though it obviously doesn't come anywhere near wrapping up its main plot. In this leg of the journey, you need only reach the city of Khare. Your final battle is against a vicious manticore, but through proper preparation, you can actually beat it just by firing off a few spells. Whether you choose that route or simply engage it in direct combat, it's a pretty good cap on things. As it should be, your decisions and inventory all carry over to the following chapter, and doing so will make your life much easier as you work through the series.

It's pretty hard to deny the influence *Sorcery!* had on the mobile gamebook scene. Following its release, we started to see more gamebook developers

respectfully playing around with the nuts and bolts of the source material, and its success was likely instrumental in emboldening inkle to push things out even farther in *80 Days* and *Sorcery! 3* ([\\$4.99](#)). It's a vital step in the progression of electronic gamebooks, and most importantly, it's pretty fun to play. For the best effect, you'll want to continue along with the follow-ups, and it's hard to say how long we'll have to wait for the concluding chapter, but poking around and finding all the cool little sights to see in each *Sorcery!* seems to become a bigger job each time around. That means there's plenty to see and do while you wait. And of course, replaying the game is a lot of fun because you can usually stumble across something you missed on a previous trip. The relative brevity of gamebooks mean that replay value is usually baked-in, but here it's done through offering a ton of different paths as opposed to killing you over and over until you find the right one.

Being only a couple of years old, *Sorcery!* still works great on modern hardware and iOS 8. It's seen several updates, with a particularly significant one that added a female player character and redid the magic interface to match with the one found in its follow-up. The last update was in March of 2014, and it seemed to just be maintenance fixes. Given that the third game is optimized for the iPhone 6 family, I hope this and the second chapter get an update towards that in the future sometime, but I imagine inkle are hard at work on the last chapter of this series for now. All in all, I'm not too worried about the future of this app. inkle has proven many times over that they will respond pretty quickly to any major issues with their games.

Sorcery! stands as a significant achievement in adapting a work from one media and taking advantage of the strengths of the new one, all without compromising what made the original so much fun to begin with. In the context of inkle's overall library, it is a mere stepping stone towards what they have realized in subsequent efforts, but it's an absolutely important one. It showed that not only would the majority of the pre-existing fanbase accept thoughtful changes, but that such careful design could also pull in players who would never even have touched the actual book. I strongly

believe there is still a place for traditional gamebooks on mobile, but I'm thrilled that there's room for other ideas within the genre, too.

That's just my take on *Sorcery!*, though. What do you think? Please share your thoughts by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). Don't forget the next episode of the **RPG Reload Podcast**, coming up next Monday and featuring Eric Ford, Andrew Fretz, and I discussing *Chaos Rings Omega*. It's a spoileriffic corker, friends! If you've got any questions you'd like us to answer on the *next* episode of the podcast, please mail them to rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com. We're looking forward to hearing from you! As for me, I'll be back next week with another great RPG. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload Hint: *Yo-ho-ho, and stuff! Time to cast off!*